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AN OUTCOMES-BASED STUDY OF THE
ADOLESCENT SPECIALIZED UNIT

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Deborah Maria Sterling


June 2005

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June 2005

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ABSTRACT

This research project examined the efficacy of the pilot project of the Adolescent Specialized Unit in the San Bernardino County Department of Children's Services. Among the outcomes explored in this project were the permanent plans for the foster children, the number of times they changed placements in the course of the study, the type of placement they are in, and the number of significant adults they have contact with.

The author developed a pre and post-test questionnaire to gather the information, and data were compared to measure the differences between the control group and the experimental group as well as the pre and post test scores. The sample of this study was comprised of 25 foster youth serviced by the Adolescent Specialized Unit and a control group of 28 foster youth who meet the same criteria, but are serviced by a region not included in the pilot program.

Findings indicate that the Adolescent Specialized Unit has met their goal of connecting youth to significant adults. The results of this study demonstrate the need for further research on the effect of mentoring and intensive case management on high-risk adolescents.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the social worker who saw the need for intensive casework for at-risk teens and acted on this need by creating the Adolescent Specialized Unit. I would also like to acknowledge the dedicated social workers who do their best each day to reach foster children of all ages and who pour their hearts into their work.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this research project to my husband in heartfelt appreciation for giving me his love and constant support, without which this would not have been possible.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The foster care system is in place to provide safe homes for children whose parents are unable to care for them. However, children need more than a roof over their heads and food on the table. Current laws and trends are recognizing the need for foster children to have more permanency and stability in their lives; the problem is finding a solution to this need. Many new programs are coming into place to offer services to children to meet more than their basic physical needs. The Adolescent Specialized Unit (ASU) is one such program. The ASU was designed to help find permanency for children in foster care and to help them live more "normal" lives. As laws are changing, new programs must be formed to meet the new mandates. This study helps to determine if the ASU is meeting the needs of the agency and of the clients.

Problem Statement

Children enter the foster care system for their protection, ideally to offer them a better life than they would have with abusive or incapacitated parents. However, in many cases foster children are failed by the system designed to help them. They are bounced from home to home,

sometimes in and out of group homes, when permanency cannot be achieved or maintained. The government (through the foster care system) provides for the child's basic needs of food, housing, and clothing; but many foster children are allowed to fall through the cracks educationally and socially. For many years these children are taken care of, but in many cases they are expected to automatically become independent when they turn 18 and are emancipated. Most of these children lack basic independent living skills and are at risk educationally and socially.

There is a growing concern within the child welfare field about outcomes for children who are in long term foster care (LTFC). Many children over the age of twelve, who have not been reunified with their parents, are in long-term foster care and are frequently placed in higher levels of care such as group homes. The lack of permanency, extended time in care, and likelihood of multiple placements present a number of challenges for children in care. Often, multiple moves result in placement in higher and higher levels of care, sometimes leading to placements that are more restrictive than necessary to ensure the child's safety. This also results in the child's changing schools multiple times, leading to academic difficulties. Furthermore, multiple placements

and placements in non-family settings lead to a lack of available adults with whom to form meaningful relationships, difficulties forming developmentally appropriate relationships with peers and perpetual chaos in which safety and stability are unlikely to develop. These adolescents experience multiple placements and are often not prepared to be self-sufficient when they emancipate from the Juvenile Court system.

Purpose of the Study

The Adolescent Specialized Unit (ASU) was created by the Rancho Cucamonga region of the San Bernardino County Department of Children's Services as a way to provide more intensive services to adolescents in order to better prepare them to leave the system. The adolescent specialists are social workers who are given reduced caseloads of only fifteen clients. The ASU provides intensive case management services for children who are aged 11 ½ years and older, are in permanency planning under long term foster care, have a history of multiple placements, and have no consistent, meaningful relationship with an adult. The ASU will pursue the most permanent plan and/or stable placement for the child and

will attempt to locate and maintain a relationship between the child and a significant adult.

This study utilized a questionnaire designed to help determine whether the Adolescent Specialized Unit is meeting its stated outcomes of obtaining the most stable placement, changing permanent plans from long term foster care to a more permanent plan (such as adoption or legal guardianship), locating and maintaining a relationship between the child and a significant adult, and preparing the child for a successful emancipation from foster care.

Significance of the Project for Social Work

Legislation has emphasized the need for minimal placements of children through early and continual permanency planning. The government is also developing laws to ensure that children maintain contact with important adults in their lives. Due to high caseloads, social workers have often been unable to provide the intensive services that adolescents in long term foster care require. The expected outcomes of the ASU address many State mandates, which affect funding for the Department of Children's Services. Ensuring that the Department of Children's Services is meeting State outcome

requirements is the only way to ensure continued funding for the various programs.

This study informs the implementation and goal attainment stage of generalist practice. In this stage of practice, social workers and clients plan and implement strategies to accomplish the stated goals. State mandates and best practice have led social workers to want to achieve the goal of permanence and relationships for children in foster care. The Adolescent Specialized Unit is one intervention designed to meet this goal.

This program is also important to the adolescents that will be served. For so long these teenagers have been placed in-group homes and have not had the opportunity to form significant bonds with adults. They have moved from school to school without anyone to monitor their academic progress. If the desired outcomes are met through this program, these adolescents will be more successful academically and socially.

The results of this study could change social work practice within the Department of Children's Services in that if this program is found to be successful, it could be implemented as standard practice throughout the County of San Bernardino, and eventually throughout the State of California as a way to meet new state guidelines for

practice as well as improving the future for some of the adolescents being serviced.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Due to multiple placement changes, foster children generally do not have the parental support and supervision many other children have. This contributes to lower academic achievement as well as being at risk for mental health problems and a higher rate of incarceration.

Falling Through The Cracks

Foster children who do not have permanency through adoption or legal guardianship often change homes frequently. This in turn leads to frequent change of schools, making keeping up academically very difficult. A longitudinal study done by Bachman, O'Malley & Johnston (cited in Blome, 1997) found that in one foster care sample, two-thirds of adolescent males repeated one or more grades during their educational career and only 39 percent ever completed the 12th grade. In a study by Blome (1997) of educational experiences of foster children, a full 37 percent of the foster care subjects had dropped out of school before data were collected; in the comparison (non-foster) group only 16 percent had left school. Generally 22.1 percent of men go to college

compared to 2.3 percent of male youth in foster care (Blome, 1997).

In a study done by Jonson-Reid and Barth (2000), children who entered the foster care system between the ages of 12 and 15 had a higher risk of incarceration for a serious or violent offense during adolescence than non-foster youth.

Other studies (as cited in Leslie et al., 2000) have shown that 35% to 85% of children in foster care have significant mental health problems ranging from relational and coping difficulties to emotional and behavior disturbances. The most common disorders seen in foster youth are conduct disorder, attention disorders, aggressive behavior, and depression.

Mentoring As An Intervention

Mentoring programs are growing rapidly throughout the United States as an intervention for at-risk youth (de Anda, 2001). These programs emphasize a relationship between a disadvantaged or troubled youth and a caring adult. The term "at risk" is generally used to describe children who lack adult support and show signs of emotional or behavioral problems. Mentors can offer

emotional support as well as being role models and providing access to various resources.

A study of the Big Brothers/Big Sisters volunteer mentoring program (Keating et al., 2002) indicated that at risk youth who met with a mentor regularly for one year were less likely to use illegal drugs or alcohol, and they were less likely to skip school. Parents of these youth also reported increases in grades and decreases in behavior problems. Programs requiring more frequent face-to-face contact may be more likely to be effective and the length of time in a mentoring relationship is positively correlated with success (Keating et al., 2002).

There has been very little research on the efficacy of mentoring programs with foster youth but existing research with nonfoster youth suggests that relationships with caring adults can make an important difference in the lives of vulnerable children and adolescents (Rhodes et al., 1999).

Laws

Section 1 of chapter 678 of Assembly Bill 636 (2001) states "The State of California has failed in its fundamental obligation to protect and care for children removed from their homes." The standards by which the

foster care system is being judged cover areas such as not finding permanency for children, lack of educational stability, and the high correlation between children in the child welfare system and those subsequently in the juvenile and adult justice systems.

Assembly Bill 408 emphasizes the importance of children having a significant adult in their lives. This bill would require the Department of Children's Services to make reasonable efforts to find and maintain a child's relationship to people the child finds important in his or her life.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Most studies of mentoring programs operate under social learning theories (Yancey, 1998) because of the behavioral impact of modeling on young people. Mentors can be effective models for adolescents to teach social skills and peer relations, reinforce positive self-image, and foster goals for the future.

Another important theory to take into consideration is attachment theory (Rhodes et al., 1999). Many foster youth find it difficult to establish close supportive relationships with adults due to past experiences of abandonment and loss of trust. It stands to reason that if

positive relationships are not formed between the adolescent and the mentoring adult, the results of the mentoring relationship will be less positive. It is also possible that foster youth may seek out support and guidance from another adult and a relationship with a mentor can be a corrective experience (Rhodes et al., 1999).

Summary

There have been several studies on the impact of mentoring relationships for at-risk adolescents, all of which point to positive results in the lives of teens. Although not much research has been done specifically with foster children, it would seem as though similar programs would be beneficial to children in foster and group homes as well as non-foster youth.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

Chapter Three documents the steps used in developing the project. Specifically, a set of forms was created to be used at intake and exit in order to measure the outcomes. The responses on the two forms were compared to see if there has been any change made in the case since transfer to the Adolescent Specialized Unit (ASU). The same information was gathered from a control group made up of adolescents in foster care from another region of San Bernardino County.

Study Design

A single group pre and post-test design was used to evaluate whether or not the Adolescent Specialized Unit is meeting its stated outcomes. The study was limited in that there were not a lot of data available during the time of the study. The ASU had only recently begun accepting cases so there were no previous cases from which to gather data. It will likely be valuable to continue a longitudinal study of the ASU over the next few years to obtain more significant data.

Sampling

The sample came from the case files of clients serviced by the Adolescent Specialized Unit. There are two social workers working as Adolescent Specialists; each of these workers ideally carries a caseload of fifteen adolescents. There were less than thirty subjects due to the program just starting up and not having a lot of referrals right away. The clients were males and females ages 11 ½ and older who are in a permanent plan of long term foster care within the Rancho Cucamonga region of San Bernardino County. The data included cases accepted into the ASU from April 2004 through February 2005.

The control group was made up of a random sample of adolescents in foster care who met the criteria for being accepted into the ASU, but who are serviced by a region of San Bernardino County not involved in this pilot program. The data were gathered over the same time period.

Data Collection and Instruments

A form was developed to be used by the social workers during intake of a case into the ASU and again at exit from ASU or the end of this study. The same form was used at intake and exit and a comparison was made to see what,

if any, changes had been made. For the control group, the data were gathered with the same time frame.

The forms included questions about several variables including number of placement changes since initial removal, number of placement changes during the study, type of placement, placement plan, preparation for independence, and relationships with significant adults.

The forms were developed with input from the supervisor and the social workers of the ASU to ensure that it is understandable and practical. This helped achieve internal and external validity of the measurement instrument.

Procedures

The data were collected from case files generated from social worker interviews with the clients. Intake information was gathered as each case was accepted into the ASU and exit information was gathered throughout the study as clients were emancipated, dismissed from the foster care system, or transferred out of the ASU. The forms were filled out by the social workers as they received and dismissed the cases. At the end of the study, exit information was filled out on all the current clients regardless of case status. The control information was

gathered by the social worker once at the beginning of the study and again at the end of the study. The forms were given to the social workers at the beginning of the study and were returned at the designated date for the end of the study.

Protection of Human Subjects

No names were recorded on the forms. Data were collected on information sheets and only the gender and age of the client was recorded. The data were recorded by the social workers so no confidential or identifying information was released. The forms were attached together and kept in the case file until complete so that the pre and post information could be compared.

Data Analysis

In this quantitative study, the dependent variables were the desired outcomes of the ASU. Specifically these are permanence, lower level of care, links to significant adults, and preparation for independent living. The association was explored between being a client of the ASU and meeting these four stated outcomes. The number of placement changes since the beginning of the study and a change to a more permanent plan measured the level of permanence achieved. The questions designed to measure

preparation for independent living included questions regarding the adolescents' future plans for housing, education and employment, as well as graduation date and access to important documents.

Summary

Several variables were researched utilizing a set of forms. The difference between responses on the intake form and the exit form was used to determine if the stated outcomes had been reached.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

The answers to the questions were examined and assessed. The data were analyzed applying statistical methods using the SPSS software program.

Presentation of the Findings

The mean age of all foster children studied ($n = 54$) was 14.93 with the youngest being 12 and the oldest 19. There was a significant difference ($t = 4.3$, $df = 52$, $p = .000$) in the mean ages of the experimental group (15.92) and the control group (14.07). In the total group, there were 24 males (44.4%) and 30 females (55.6%). The control group ($n = 29$) consisted of 12 males (41.1%) and 17 females (58.6%), whereas the experimental group ($n = 25$) consisted of 12 males (48%) and 13 females (53%).

The number of prior placements was very similar between the groups. The control group had a range of 3 to 24 with a mean of 8.45 and a standard deviation of 5.38. The number of prior placements within the experimental group ranged from 2 to 25 with a mean of 8.72 and a standard deviation of 5.76. The number of placement changes during the study ranged from zero to 8 in the

control group with a mean of 1.59 and a standard deviation of 1.64. In the experimental group, the range of placement changes was zero to 5 with a mean of 1.32 and a standard deviation of 1.28.

Moving children from group homes to a lower level of care is one of the goals of the Adolescent Specialized Unit. The adolescents in the experimental group were significantly less likely to be placed in a group home by the end of the study (chi-square = 4.56, df = 1, p = .033) where the control group did not show a significant change in placement (see table in Appendix B).

Another goal of the ASU is to help provide children with a more stable permanent plan. The most stable plan would be maintaining a child with his or her family of origin. In descending order of permanence is family reunification, adoption, legal guardianship, and long term foster care. The majority of teens in both groups started out under the plan of long-term foster care (experimental group 23, control group 25) and there was very little change to a more permanent plan for either group at the end of the study (experimental group 22, control group 27). The change was not significant for either group.

Considering the variable of relationships with significant adults, the control group showed a mean of

1.14 (standard deviation .93) adults identified at the beginning of the study and a mean of 1.04 with standard deviation .96 at the end of the study. The difference was not significant. The experimental group showed a mean of 1.8 (standard deviation 2.0) adults at the beginning of the study and a mean of 2.76 (standard deviation 2.5) at the end of the study. This difference was significant ($t = 3.36$, $df = 52$, $p = .001$).

The variables on the questionnaire designed to measure preparation for independent living were not utilized in the study due to lack of information provided by the social workers.

Summary

The preliminary data did not show statistical significance for change to a more permanent plan or reduction in the number of placement changes. However, the experimental group showed a significant decrease in-group home placements and a significant increase in relationships with significant adults.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to do a preliminary examination of the pilot program of the Adolescent Specialized Unit in order to determine if they are meeting their stated outcomes.

Discussion

Data in this study support the hypothesis that providing more intensive case management to high-risk foster youth will affect the adolescents' experience in foster care by showing an increase in relationships between the foster youth and significant adults in their lives and by decreasing the likelihood of placement in a group home.

As mentioned earlier, Assembly Bill 408 requires placement agencies to make reasonable efforts to maintain a child's relationships with adults who are important to the child. This study shows that social workers for the Adolescent Specialized Unit are meeting this goal, whereas social workers in general are not.

The importance of increasing relationships between foster children and significant adults in their lives goes

beyond meeting government guidelines. As shown in previous studies, having relationships with significant adults can reduce the instances of foster children ending up homeless or in the criminal justice system upon emancipating from the foster care system. These significant relationships can also support the adolescents while they are in foster care to be more successful educationally and to have increased mental health. Increasing relationships in the short term should lead to some of the other desired outcomes in the long-term.

The study only collected preliminary data beginning when the ASU was initiated as a pilot program, so it is still too early to know if any of the other outcomes will eventually be reached. More stable permanent plans are a possible future outcome of nurturing relationships with adults who could eventually become caregivers. More stable placement will also likely follow the reduction in group home placements.

Limitations

There are several possible limitations to this research. One limitation in this study is the fact that the Adolescent Specialized Unit is in the beginning stages of development. Most of the expected outcomes will take

longer to achieve and as the social workers become more familiar with their new role, they may become more effective. Another limitation was the inability to obtain sufficient data to test whether there was an increase in independent living skills. The Department of Children's Services currently does not keep the specific data that was requested on the questionnaire. There are programs in place to assist foster youth with independent living skills and emancipation issues; however, the ASU social workers are emphasizing this component more than traditional social work currently does. Collection and comparison of data will show that youth serviced by the ASU are more likely to obtain their important documents and have more support as they prepare for emancipation. Another possible limitation is the small number of cases available from which to draw data. However, based on the significant results considering the newness of the program, the effectiveness of the ASU is clear.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

It is recommended that the Adolescent Specialized Unit be continued as a practice within the Department of Children's Services and be expanded to serve more youth. Considering the significant results over a short period of

time in decreasing group home placements and increasing relationships with significant adults, this program has proven to be effective and has the potential of positive results in other areas given more time.

It is further recommended that this study be continued in order to determine if the Adolescent Specialized Unit continues to meet the goal of connecting youth with significant adults. Further study will also help determine if the ASU is meeting any of their other stated goals in the long term. A longitudinal study including follow-up with youth after emancipation will show the long term positive effects of more intensive case management.

Conclusions

As much of the previous research has shown, mentoring relationships are a significant factor in reducing problems with foster youth. Having a program designed to give adolescents in foster care more one-on-one attention will potentially serve to increase self-esteem and to reduce the amount of exhibited behavior problems, which often lead to multiple placement changes. Increasing the number of relationships with adults may also serve to stabilize placement for these high-risk youth.

APPENDIX A
QUESTIONNAIRE

INTAKE

Gender: M/F

Age: _____

1. How many placements since initial removal? _____

2. Current placement type? _____

3. Current permanent plan:

a. Long Term Foster Care

b. Legal Guardianship

c. Adoption

d. Family Reunification

e. Other _____

4. Does the adolescent have:

☐ Job

☐ Bank Account

☐ California ID/DL

☐ Social Security Card

☐ Birth Certificate

☐ Knowledge of the bus system

5. Anticipated/completed graduation or GED date? _____

6. Future plans:

a. Housing _____

b. Education _____

c. Employment _____

7. How many significant adults identified? _____

EXIT

Gender: M/F

Age: _____

1. How many placement changes during study? _____

2. Current placement type? _____

3. Current permanent plan:

a. Long Term Foster Care

b. Legal Guardianship

c. Adoption

d. Family Reunification

e. Other _____

4. Does the adolescent have:

☐ Job

☐ Bank Account

☐ California ID/DL

☐ Social Security Card

☐ Birth Certificate

☐ Knowledge of the bus system

5. Anticipated/completed graduation or GED date? _____

6. Future plans:

a. Housing _____

b. Education _____

c. Employment _____

7. How many significant adults identified? _____

APPENDIX B

TABLES

current placement type * experimental or control group Crosstabulation

current placement type		Control Group	Experimental group	Total
group home	Count	20	10	30
	Expected Count	16.1	13.9	30.0
other	Count	9	15	24
	Expected Count	12.9	11.1	24.0
Total	Count	29	25	54
	Expected Count	29.0	25.0	54.0

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